

**The Voice of One Crying Tolerance:  
The Figure of John the Baptist  
in  
Some Recent June 24th Homilies  
in Montréal**

**by**

**Donald L. Boisvert, Ph.D.  
Concordia University, Montréal, Québec**

**American Academy of Religion  
Eastern International Regional Meeting  
Le Moyne College, Syracuse, New York**

**12-14 April 1996**

On June 23rd, 1902, the eve of the feast of Saint John the Baptist, a sermon was preached in Québec City by Monsignor L.-A. Pâquet, on the occasion of the silver jubilee celebrations of the Société-Saint-Jean-Baptiste of that city. It has become a classic statement of the messianic and providential motif in French Canadian nationalism at the turn of the century. I should like to quote two particularly enlightening passages from it:

"All peoples are called to a true religion, but not all have received a religious mission. History both ancient and modern proves this: there are peoples dedicated to the soil, there are industrial peoples, merchant races, conquerors, there are peoples versed in the arts and the sciences, and there are also races of apostles. And who are these races of apostles? Ah! recognize them by their radiating genius and by their generous souls: they are the ones who under the guidance of the Church have done the work and spread the blessings of the Christian civilization; who have put their hand to all the beauty, greatness, and divinity that we see in the world; who with the pen or the point of a sword have engraved the name of God into history; who have treasured and kept alive and undying the love of truth and goodness.

(....)

"Now, my brothers, - why should I hesitate to say it? - we have the privilege of being entrusted with this social priesthood granted only to select peoples. I cannot doubt that this religious and civilizing mission is the true vocation and the special vocation of the French race in America. Yes, let us not forget, we are not only a civilized race, we are pioneers of a civilization; we are not only a religious people, we are messengers of the spirit of religion; we are not only dutiful sons of the Church, we are, or we should be, numbered among its zealots, its defenders, and its apostles. Our mission is less to handle capital than to stimulate ideas; less to light the furnaces of factories than to maintain and spread the glowing fires of religion and thought, and to help them cast their light into the distance."

These excerpts are quite remarkable for a number of reasons. First, there is the blatant, almost chauvinistic appeal to ethnic pride in fashioning a religious mission for French Canadians on the North American continent. The tone is explicitly

triumphant. These sentiments are the manifestation of the ultramontanist world-view which was normative in Québec for close to a century. The expression "social priesthood" is particularly revealing in this regard, for it speaks to a concern with the proper and appropriate role of religion in influencing the social order. Second, these words clearly equate the interests of French Canada -- in terms of a noble and uplifting destiny -- with those of the Catholic Church, and vice-versa. It comes as no surprise that the Church was not particularly interested in elaborating a brand of nationalism which might make it possible for modernism and industrialization to flourish, thereby eroding the bases of its own power and influence. Hence the clear rejection of finance and industry as "legitimate" social vocations for French Canada. Of course, this is also an attempt at justifying and legitimizing the very real inferior economic position in which French Canadians found themselves at this time. A third interesting element of this sermon is the implicit value judgements it makes with respect to the worth and value of the non-spiritual vocations of other peoples or so-called races, particularly those engaging in mercantile activities. One needs to read Anglo-Saxon here, for that is what is intended. French Canadians are a superior race, because they are concerned with things of the spirit; English Canadians are inferior by comparison, because they seek material gain. Again, another form of ideological compensation.

We therefore have the image of a chosen people blessed with a spiritual mission to shed the light of Catholic Christianity into the darkest recesses of a Protestant North America. This is the image of a people which "has come to bear witness to the truth," to act as a precursor for something greater. And it is also a poor people, one not concerned with comfort or material gain. It is not surprising that such a homily

was preached at an event associated with the feastday of John the Baptist. Notice the parallels between some of the scriptural attributes of the Saint and those reflected onto French Canada, a point to which I will return shortly.

Two explanations can be put forward as to why John the Baptist should have been chosen as the patron saint of French Canadians. Apart from the fact that June 24th, his feastday, had been celebrated since the earliest days of New France, primarily because of its association with the summer solstice, and was consequently firmly established as a tradition, Jean-Baptiste was also a common first name among French Canadians, much as Patrick was among the Irish, and they were therefore collectively identified as "Jean-Baptiste." On the occasion of the first banquet de la Saint-Jean in 1834, when Ludger Duvernay, journalist and founder of Montréal's Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste, proposed that John the Baptist should be the patron saint of French Canadians and that the feastday of his birth should be their national holiday, he was merely institutionalizing an easily identifiable and generally accepted feast in popular tradition. He was also giving stature and credibility to a stereotype: that of the name Jean-Baptiste. In fact, inspired by the aggressive nationalism of a political group known as the Patriotes with which he was very much in sympathy, Duvernay wanted to instill in French Canadians a sense of themselves as a distinct people and nation in history by giving them a national holiday like other ethnic groups.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that John the Baptist was a bit of a latecomer as patron saint of French Canada. He was declared as such by Pope Pius X only in 1908. The earliest patron and protector of New France was Saint Joseph, chosen by

Franciscan missionaries in 1624. In 1876, Pius IX would proclaim Saint Ann to be patron of the ecclesiastical province of Québec. There was even an attempt to create a new feastday on August 15th, feast of the Assumption, to be known as la Saint-Napoléon, in honour of Napoléon Bonaparte.

The symbolic association between John the Baptist and French Canada was something which was really built up by the Catholic Church following the abortive outcome of the Rebellion of 1837-38. Many of the attributes of the Saint, and of his role in Christian history, were portrayed as component parts of the French Canadian identity and purpose. In the gospel according to Saint John, John the Baptist is a witness, come to "speak for the light," "the voice of one crying in the wilderness." These words were to be used time and again by the Catholic clergy of Québec to fashion a destiny for French Canada, most notably at the time of the massive French Canadian emigrations to the New England states. This destiny -- this calling -- was a spiritual one: among all nations, French Canada was chosen, like the Baptist, to bring the light of Catholic Christianity to the New World, to be the precursor of a fully Christian (read Catholic) order. This providential mission, which was seen as having motivated the earliest settlers of New France, remained as the basic inheritance of French Canadians. A Catholic French Canada was the bridge between a profane and a Christian society in North America, much as John the Baptist was the link between the Old and New Testaments.

As mentioned earlier, such a vision was essentially a form of ideological compensation for the position of economic inferiority in which French Canadians found themselves. It is therefore perhaps more than simply coincidental that John

the Baptist, another of whose attributes is his complete disregard for material comfort and gain, should have been chosen as patron. The symbol of the Saint was not only a strikingly apt one; it was almost a national archetype in terms of its political economy.

As master symbol of French Canada, the Baptist was not quite of the same stature, nor was he the type of highly evocative or emotionally-charged national symbol which is found, for example, in the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe or even the Irish Saint Patrick. There is a total absence of any cult of John the Baptist in French Canadian popular religiosity. Nor is there any shrine dedicated to him. Indeed, many other saints, some quite minor in Catholic hagiology, enjoyed a wider devotional appeal. Rather than being an evocative national symbol, John the Baptist was a manipulated national symbol. He was chosen and imposed as patron saint by a particular political and intellectual elite in 1834, and later recuperated by another elite, that of the Catholic clerical establishment. What the Saint represented in terms of the French Canadian national character was essentially what this clerico-political elite desired that he should represent, whether it be missionary zeal, sobriety and moderation, self-effacement, religious rectitude, material indifference, patriotism or Catholic ardour.

A brief word needs to be said about the traditional iconography associated with the patron saint of French Canada, more particularly as this is reflected in the annual parades of June 24th. From 1866 onward, and for well over a century, the Baptist was personified by a young, curly-haired (and normally blond) boy of about nine or ten years old, accompanied by a lamb. The portrayal of the Saint as a youngster

has a long and distinguished lineage in the history of art. But the double image of an immature, dependent child and a passive lamb as symbols of French Canada, and later Québec, did not appeal to everyone, and gave rise to some rather bitter polemic between more liberal-thinking intellectuals and the Church. Interestingly enough, the last Baptist depicted in a parade, and the one destroyed and literally beheaded in the course of a riot in 1969, was a papier mâché statue in the form of a mature adult.

Québec society has changed radically in the last forty years. Saint John the Baptist, though he remains the official patron of French Canada, is no longer invoked as such – except, of course, in Catholic circles. His feastday is known simply as la Fête nationale. How is he portrayed today? I propose to look at this question through an analysis of the June 24th homilies given by the Cardinal Archbishop of Montréal over a six-year period, from 1990 to 1995. Before I do so, however, I need to provide some context with reference to the significant political events of these six years.

There are three important dates marking this period. The first occurs in 1990 with the failure of the Meech Lake agreement. This agreement between the federal government and the ten provinces called for an amendment to the constitution which would have recognized Québec as a “distinct society” within the Canadian federation. The provincial legislatures of all but two provinces ratified the agreement. It was therefore never passed. Actually, the deadline for ratification was June 23rd. Needless to say, the outpouring of Québec national sentiment on the 24th was something to behold! The second event is two years later in 1992, with the national referendum on the Charlottetown accord. This accord basically enshrined the substance of the Meech Lake agreement, but also included special self-governing

provisions for Canada's Native Peoples. It also did not pass. The third, more recent event is the narrow defeat of the referendum on Québec sovereignty in 1995. As will be noted, this six-year period is rich in political life. Its overarching theme is the failure to arrive at a modus vivendi in terms of the place of Québec within -- or outside -- the Canadian federation.

With this context in mind, I should like to offer a few observations on the general tone of the six homilies, before addressing the specific portrayal of John the Baptist which they contain. A first point to be made is the explicit rejection by the Archbishop of any endorsement of one particular political option over another. This is stated quite unequivocally, by references to papal teachings about the proper concern of the Church for the poor and the needy. The Archbishop recognizes the right and duty of citizens to make the political choices which they make, without interference from the Church. On the other hand, he reserves the right to inform citizens about the kind of society they should opt for: one which is inclusive, tolerant, open and caring.

A second observation has to do with the appeal to historical continuity. On several occasions -- most notably in 1992 at the time of the 350th anniversary of the founding of Montréal -- the religious vision of the founders of New France is called forth, and the challenge is made to citizens to remain faithful to such a noble and high calling. Interestingly enough, this is a variation on the earlier theme of the spiritual mission of French Canadians, though perhaps not as imperialistic in tone.

Finally, the six homilies speak a great deal about the moral crisis of Québec society.

Issues such as sexual irresponsibility, individualism, materialism, lack of concern for the family, and the obsession with violence, among others, are mentioned. The Baptist himself, because of his uprightness and his fearlessness in confronting the moral issues of his time, is held up as the perfect model and challenge for today's Québec Catholics in responding to their own apparent crisis.

I propose to discuss the contemporary portrayal of John the Baptist, as reflected in these six homilies, in terms of three themes: the Baptist as challenge and witness, the Baptist as conciliator, and the Baptist as societal model.

Consistent with the type of language which was used by an earlier generation of Catholic clerics, John the Baptist is still held up as someone who challenges people to bear witness to the person and teachings of Jesus Christ. Many of his attributes -- such as forcefulness, determination and vigour -- are still considered paradigmatic. In the 1991 sermon, for example, the following is said: "John the Baptist is a model for us. We are happy that he is our patron saint. The strength which we find in him summons us to be men and women of great courage and vigour. The hard life which he led reminds us of the importance of not letting ourselves be mesmerized by what is nothing but ease and glitter. His loyalty and uprightness inspire us to maintain our steady course and not live in deceit. His attachment to Christ challenges our faith." And again in 1993: "May John the Baptist, our patron, help us to become that to which we are called: witnesses to Christ, witnesses to love." There is nothing unusual about these kinds of sentiments; they are, in fact, quite traditional in Catholic thinking: the saints as supreme models of proper human behaviour. In the context of a national holiday, however, they assume a particular

flavour and colouring. Notice the shift in emphasis taking place here. No longer are we talking about a patron or a model who challenges people to adopt a particular collective or national identity and purpose. Rather, this is a return to the age-old theme of conversion and the forging of a personal sense of a place in the world, one taking its meaning from a direct relationship with the divinity. This is not the talk of destiny, whether religious or ethnic; it is the language of personal salvation. It is also a discourse consistent with the Church's own decision to withdraw from direct involvement with Québec politics.

The second motif concerns the Baptist as conciliator. The conclusion of the homily preached in 1992 is as follows: "May John the Baptist guide us. He was a strong and proud man. He was upright and removed from earthly concerns. He knew how to denounce evil. He was not shy about pointing the way to truth and light. He was not afraid of calling his fellow citizens to a higher purpose. Let us listen to his voice. Let us take up the important challenges, we who believe in justice, we who believe in fraternity, we who believe in Jesus Christ." In the 1993 homily, the Archbishop states, when outlining a scenario of what the Baptist would say were he among us today: "He would speak loud and clear. He would not put on kid gloves. He would name things as they are, without any hesitation. He would put his finger on exactly what is not going well in our society and what needs to be changed in our behaviour. He would denounce our selfishness. He would warn us about the spirit of intolerance (...) John the Baptist would speak to us greatly of love." There is another significant transformation in language being effected here. The emphasis is no longer on the triumph of ethnic missionary Catholicism, on the right and only way claimed by Holy Mother Church, on the sacred and exclusive calling of the

French "race," as it was then referred to. Words like "love," "tolerance" and "fraternity" make their appearance. Appeals to unity and understanding -- to conciliation and to diversity -- are put forth, and are held up as the supreme social values. The shift is from a paradigm of exclusivity to one of increasing inclusivity -- in itself, a reflection of the very real and urgent challenges confronting Québec society.

The third motif is that of the Baptist as societal model. In 1990, at the time of the defeat of the Meech Lake agreement, the Archbishop made the following observation: "The strong-worded prophet we honour today as our guide would certainly have nothing to say about Meech Lake. But he has much to say to us about the art of living together which he proclaimed in the desert. His appeals ring especially true at the present time (...) It is a wonderful teaching of the prophet which proclaims the divine law of sharing, of respect for others, of non-violence, of faithfulness to the moral law written on the heart of every human individual." A similar sentiment was expressed in the 1994 homily: "Far beyond the centuries which have passed and the times which have changed greatly, John the Baptist remains a captivating man and a model which can surely inspire us today in order to confront courageously and with determination, and in an effort at truth, the challenges which belong to our era and to our society." In this case, there is an upfront acknowledgement of the inappropriateness of direct commentary on a particular political option; the Baptist is no longer presented as a figure with a political voice. On the other hand, he remains very relevant by virtue of the social values with which he challenges us. Notice what these are -- sharing, respect, non-violence -- and how different they are from the zeal and righteousness preached

only a few decades ago. These values are eminently democratic and modern in both inspiration and character. They speak of a culture which no longer defines itself in religious or spiritual terms, but rather which finds itself obligated to deal with the pluralism and secularism characterizing any society today in the West.

You will undoubtedly have picked up on a fundamental ambivalence in what I have presented, and you are correct. While it is true that the language surrounding the Baptist may have changed, the fact remains that the powerful imagery of strength, virility, moral fortitude and manly virtue is still associated with him. Actually, these are presented as important qualities for a Christian who is forced to live in an apparently godless world. In essence, the Baptist is a figure who is meant to challenge and stand in opposition to materialist social values. This rings especially true when one of the sermons even goes so far as to claim that today's social problems are really spiritual in origin.

This ambivalence hides a deeper reality. In all this effort to make the Baptist more relevant and contemporary -- to dust him off, so to speak -- I would submit that he has not really changed that much in a fundamental sense. The descriptive language may be less triumphant and more "spiritualized," but the concern with portraying and understanding Québec in terms of its patron saint is still very much present. Only in this case, he is the protector of a modern, democratic state at a time of great political flux. I wonder how John the Baptist would feel if he were suddenly to find himself as patron saint of a full-fledged nation. I wonder if he might not revert back to his old missionary days.